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ABSTRACT

Many teachers are hesitant to incorporate peer-led discussion groups into their classrooms. Teachers worry that if they relinquish control in their classrooms students may miss the main theme of stories or may spend little time on task, groups may dissolve from excessive bickering, and their classrooms will be out of control. Nevertheless, the benefits of small group discussion for the students must outweigh these concerns. Research has shown that students who have participated in peer-led discussions have a better understanding of texts, express themselves in more complex ways, approach texts more confidently, write better analytical essays, and are more focused on their reading related tasks. Perhaps most importantly, students regularly show a preference for peer-led discussions in their classrooms, and when children are given the opportunity to do activities they enjoy, they tend to perform better. An examination of recent literature on peer discussion supports the use of student-led small discussion groups as an alternative method for literature discovery. Five recent journal articles which yield much information are those by Maryann Eeds and Deborah Wells (1989); William Sweigart (1991); Janice Almasi (1995); Cathy Roller and Penny Beed (1994); and Carol Gilles (1994). Further research is suggested in the area of peer-led discussion groups in lower elementary school, where some or all of the students may be unable to read the text in question. (CR)

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Peer-Led Literature Discussion Groups:
An Analysis of Recent Literature

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Introduction

For generations, educators have been attempting to determine the most appropriate format for the exploration of literature with students. Until fairly recently, teacher dominated formats, such as lecturing, teacher generated questioning, and teacher guided discussion have been the predominant vehicles for literary analysis in the classroom. During the past seven to ten years, however, teachers and researchers have begun to question the effectiveness of teacher centered literature lessons and have consequently turned their attention to investigations of student-led small discussion groups as an alternative method for literature discovery.

This paper will examine five recent journal articles in which the effectiveness of peer-led discussion groups is addressed. The review will begin with one of the earliest and most important studies of literature discussion, Maryann Eeds' and Deborah Wells' (1989) "Grand Conversations: An Exploration of Meaning Construction in Literature Study Groups". Following this summarization, an analysis of two subsequent studies of peer-group conversations and two response articles by teachers who have been applying this research to practice in the field follow. Each of these articles substantiates Eeds' and Wells' original support of the effectiveness of discussion groups in general, while further stressing the power of student-led discussion groups in particular in the creation of meaning from text, the evaluation of literature, the production of well-considered analytical writing, and the enjoyment of reading.

Eeds and Wells: Grand Conversations

Maryann Eeds and Deborah Wells were prompted to embark upon their 1989 study of discussion groups by their observation that "gentle inquisition", that is to say, teacher questioning, was the dominant form of classroom discourse. Teachers seemed to focus on what the authors call "efferent" reading, reading for lessons that can be extrapolated from the text, rather than on "aesthetic" reading, that which emphasizes the reader's interaction with the text. In addition, psychological research asserting that verbal exchanges with others are crucial for textual understanding suggested to them that classroom discussion might facilitate more critical thinking among student participants.

The authors trained seventeen teaching credential candidates to guide discussion for small groups of fifth and sixth grade students. Four of the discussion groups were chosen for videotaping, transcription, and an coded analysis of comments.

Four types of talk were delineated through the discussion analyses: meaning construction, personal story sharing, active inquiry (predictions, anticipations, etc.), and critique. Students interacted with the texts, alluded to all elements of literature (although not

necessarily by name), and most importantly, included the retelling of the plot and a demonstration of good recall (common aims of traditional teacher inquiry questions) in their discussions. The authors felt that the discussion groups accomplished the same objectives as "gentle inquisition" had, but in a more collaborative manner. Their discussion transcriptions illustrated the integral role of conversation in the building of understanding.

Eeds and Wells neglected to discuss the specific role of the discussion guide in their study. From their occasional allusions, it appears that the teacher was sometimes a participant and sometimes a leader, but never an unbiased observer. Subsequent studies, including the following investigation by William Sweigart, begin to examine the appropriate role for the teacher in these discussions.

Sweigart: Support for Peer-Led Discussions

In his 1991 study, William Sweigart built upon Eeds' and Wells' research by investigating the differential effects of lecture, teacher led discussion, and small group discussion upon students' writings. His elaborately constructed and statistically analyzed study examined the process of meaning construction and writing as well as the proficiency of students' essays and their attitudes about the learning process.

Sweigart divided fifty-eight San Francisco high school students into three groups, each of which worked with three texts. In each group, one text was presented through lecture, one through teacher-led discussion, and one through small group discussion. Students were asked to write both content summarization essays and analytical essays based upon the texts. In addition, they took tests upon completion of the lessons to measure their knowledge of the material, and they completed surveys intended to gauge their feelings about the different presentation techniques.

The results of the study are quite impressive. The author found that the students in group discussions scored significantly higher on the content tests. Students involved in discussion of any kind spent more time "on task" than those who had been subjected to the lecture format, and these same students wrote substantially better analytical essays. Of the two discussion groups, the peer discussion group's essays were stronger than the those of the teacher-led discussion group. Finally, the students themselves preferred the discussion formats, especially the student-led settings in which they had greater control over the direction of the discourse.

Sweigart's results clearly support the benefits of small group discussion in the arenas of critical thinking, analytical writing, and student enjoyment. One drawback of this study is its limited scope; the effectiveness of peer-led discussion groups among younger students is left uncertain. This limitation is addressed by Almasi's study.

Almasi: Peer-Led Discussions and Sociocognitive Conflicts

Janice Almasi's (1995) recent study, like Sweigart's, investigated the differential effects of teacher-led and peer-led discussion groups upon comprehension. Her examination was specifically directed towards the determination of the context that better enables students to identify and understand what she calls "sociocognitive conflicts" -- literary incongruities discovered by the reader.

Almasi studied six peer-led and six teacher-led discussions among ninety-seven heterogeneously grouped suburban fourth grade students. Discussions were videotaped and transcribed, and comments were coded according to type and complexity. A thorough statistical analysis provided the author with data from which she drew a number of substantial conclusions.

Three different categories of sociocognitive conflict were defined: conflict within the self, conflict with others, and conflict with the text. In peer-led discussions, conflicts within the self (e.g., "I don't understand why this happened...") were most frequently discussed, while in teacher-led discussions, conflicts with the text were generally addressed. Different patterns of discourse characterized the different conflicts; student-led discussions were more conversational, containing "arched" and "embedded" statements of relatively greater complexity. Teacher-led discussions, on the other hand, consisted largely of "chained" statements, those that characterize contexts with a central authority figure, and student comments were simple and few. Following the study, Almasi found that the students who had been engaged in peer-led discussions were better able to recognize sociocognitive conflicts in other texts.

Based on her results, the author claims that students participating in peer-led discussion groups were more engaged in the task at hand because they felt more connected to the topics of discussion which they themselves had generated. In addition, these students were more frequently exposed to their peers' cognitive processing which enabled them to better understand and mimic conflict resolution. The peer-led settings fostered cooperation, encouraged more complex thought, and allowed students more opportunities to talk than did teacher-led discussions. Almasi's work strongly supports the use of peer-led discussion groups in the lower grades, as Sweigart's work supports their use in high school classrooms. These claims are academic, however; it is important also to examine the effectiveness of these discussions in classrooms where they have been integrated into the teacher's routine.

Thoughts From the Trenches

Cathy Roller and Penny Beed (1994) turned their frustrations with small group discussions into an article examining what they perceived as "unsuccessful" conversations. The authors were concerned that the discussions transpiring in their classrooms were not as exemplary as those they read about in journals; they were not always hearing "grand conversations". They identified three types of discussions that caused teachers to feel uncomfortable: chains of personal stories which seemed to lose their connection to the text, conversations with enthusiasm but no content, and content-free, lifeless conversations. This last type they determined to be useful in its role as "filler", a form of verbal stalling which allows the speaker time to think about more complex issues. After further consideration, the authors felt that enthusiastic but seemingly contentless comments should be viewed in a positive light, as any enthusiasm surrounding literature represents positive progress. Finally, the chains of personal anecdotes were reevaluated as being using in the creation of a network of personal experience within which the student understands the text. The authors felt that a reexamination of "off-task" comments was necessary because an adult's perspective on the relevance of comments may not coincide with a child's. Roller and Beed encourage teachers to regard ordinary conversations as valuable and to focus on the successful aspects of their discussions rather than on the ways in which the discussions do not match up to academic models.

Along similar lines, Carol Gilles (1994) examines three teachers' struggles to facilitate meaningful peer group discussions in their classrooms. In one of her examples, the teacher discovered through taping her classes that she was still controlling discussions despite her nominal switch to a peer-led format. Through self-examination, this teacher has been able to gradually alter her classroom techniques. Another teacher discovered that the discussion group format does not naturally suit some students; these students may need the teacher's help in finding a voice and being recognized as valuable contributors to their groups. Gilles provides these examples as a way of offering support for teachers struggling with the transition to literature study groups. She encourages self-reflection and professional inquiry as meaningful resources and alternatives to the all too common abandonment of challenging discussion groups.

Reflections and Conclusions

Many teachers are as hesitant to incorporate peer-led discussion groups into their classrooms as they are to convert to project based learning experiences. For many teachers, relinquishing control in their classrooms can be both frightening and intimidating. Teachers worry that the students may miss the main themes of stories, that groups may dissolve from

excessive bickering, that students may spend little time "on-task", or that their classrooms will be "out-of-control". Indeed, any of these outcomes is possible, especially if the teacher has not spent valuable time encouraging tolerance, open exchange, and collaboration in the classroom.

Nevertheless, the benefits of small group discussion for the students must outweigh the teacher's personal concerns. As the above literature review has illustrated, students who have participated in peer-led discussions have a better understanding of texts, express themselves in more complex ways, more confidently approach future texts, write better analytical essays, and are more focused on their reading related tasks. In addition, they talk more, and as the studies described in this paper assert, frequent talk is a necessary element in the construction of textual meaning. Perhaps most importantly, students regularly show a preference for peer-led discussions in their classrooms, and when children are given the opportunity to do activities which they find enjoyable, they tend to perform better. Students can and will "rise to the occasion" when the task is challenging and rewarding. Faith in this idea should preempt teachers' visions of group discussion fiascoes. The overwhelming message communicated by this research is to incorporate these groups into the classroom as much as possible, at least where literature is concerned; some risks must be taken to achieve this end.

One significant gap in this research lies in the lack of examination of discussion in lower elementary school contexts. Research relating to upper elementary, middle school, and high school settings abounds, but no one seems to have addressed the issue of peer-led discussion groups in classrooms where some or all of the students may be unable to read the text in question. It is possible that one precocious reader could guide other students through a text; however, it is also possible that the other first or second graders would disregard this child entirely. Research in this area is needed.

In addition, articles dedicated to assisting the classroom teacher with peer-led discussion evaluation would greatly contribute to the existing body of research. Currently, many teachers feel as though they are unable to assess students' participation and learning in a peer-led discussion group because the teacher is not always a part of that group. Teachers would benefit from a presentation of tactics designed to elicit a well structured discussion summaries from small group participants. These tips would undoubtedly increase the teacher's confidence in the effectiveness of discussions.

It is likely that, with the increased popularity of project based learning and the widespread attention devoted to the restructuring of curriculum, more articles addressing peer-led discussion groups will be published in the near future. Each individual foray into this uncertain realm produces new knowledge of the discussion process and a better understanding of children's cognitive processing. Hopefully teachers and researchers will continue to share

their experiences with the educational community in order to help others create their own exciting learning communities.